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Kennedy's Using NSC For 'Skull Sessions' Takes Risk of Leaks

Question After Stevenson Affair Is Whether
President's Aids and Advisers Will Now Feel Less
Free to Speak Frankly in Discussions That Ex-
ecutive Encourages to Help Him in Decisions.

By JAMES DEAKIN

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 15.

A CRUCIAL QUESTION raised by the "Adlai Stevenson affair" is whether President Kennedy will find it harder in the future to obtain a wide range of opinion, including unpopular or dissenting views, from his advisers in the National Security Council.

The question, a vital one from the standpoint of effective government, is this: In the aftermath of the anonymous attack on Stevenson in a national magazine will other presidential assistants and advisers feel as free to speak frankly and openly in the deliberations of the NSC?

Or will they fear that the hitherto-secret sessions of the Council are no longer completely confidential, and that the views they express, the positions they take, may be "leaked" to unfriendly newspapers or magazines and used against them?

IN LISTING the adverse effects of the Stevenson episode, several experienced students of government ranked this possibility at or near the top. The danger, these men believe, can be summed up as follows:

Will presidential advisers, fearing retribution if they express divergent or unorthodox opinions, water down and tailor their views to conform to the "safe" majority and the conventional attitude?

If this were to happen, in the opinion of these observers, Mr. Kennedy, or any President, would be deprived of the wide spectrum of opinion that he must have in order to reach intelligent decisions and guard against as many eventualities as possible.

"The last place where orthodoxy is needed," one veteran official told the Post-Dispatch, "is the National Security Council."

Stevenson himself, shortly after the Saturday Evening Post article appeared, expressed concern over the possibility that the free exchange of opinion in the NSC might be stifled by fear of publication. "Advice is of little value," he told reporters, "if it is chilled by fear of disclosure and misrepresentation."

Similar concern was expressed by Senator Clair Engle (Dem.), California, in a letter to the President. "I cannot too clearly emphasize the anxiety that some of us feel about this breach of security at the highest levels in our government," he said,

Engle urged Mr. Kennedy to find out who made the anonymous statements in the Saturday Evening Post "and throw them out of government." The President, however, has made it clear that he does not intend to do this.

THE WHITE HOUSE does not believe that the Stevenson episode will inhibit free and frank discussion in the NSC. "There is not even the slightest chance of this," a high-ranking Administration official told the Post-Dispatch.

Considering the personality of John F. Kennedy and the men around him, a President and a set of advisers to whom argumentation and talk are the breath of life, it is absurd to think that the National Security Council under Mr. Kennedy will be anything but a forum for the fullest discussion of a wide range of views, this official said.

If some of this discussion leaks out and brings this or that individual under fire, he added, "then it is simply a case of the Harry Truman doctrine: If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

THE PREVAILING attitude in the White House after the Stevenson episode appears to be this: Meetings of the NSC will continue to be in secret and every possible

security measure will be taken, but there may be more leaks, nevertheless. "I won't be surprised if we have more of them as time goes on," one official said.

In part, this expectation is due to the nature of the Kennedy operation in general. Things are far more free and easy in the White House today than under Dwight D. Eisenhower. In part this is due to the changes that Mr. Kennedy has made in the specific operations of the NSC.

Under Eisenhower, with his belief in the staff system and the military chain of command, NSC meetings usually were formal briefing sessions, at which positions already worked out and agreed on at the staff level were presented and explained. The President then said yes or no.

More than once, Eisenhower's subordinates prevented cabinet departments from bringing disputes to his attention, an official who served in both the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations told the Post-Dispatch. The White House staff insisted instead that arguments be ironed out before they were brought into the NSC meeting.

OCCASIONALLY this meant that positions were watered down in order to achieve agreement. Notably in the case of several disputes between the State and Defense Departments, the resulting compromise "were so generalized as to be wishy-washy," the official said.

How a President uses the NSC and the role he assigns to it are entirely up to him. Mr. Kennedy has largely dispensed with the Council's briefing function, except for an opening intelligence summary by Director John A. McCone of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Instead, Mr. Kennedy uses the NSC meetings as "skull sessions" in which ideas are thrown out for intensive discussion and positions are hammered out in his presence and with his active participation. White House sources said this procedure is a strong guarantee against the kind of inhibition that some have foreseen as a result of the Stevenson incident.

The fact that there is more discussion and argument in the NSC under Mr. Kennedy, however, is considered likely to increase the chance that positions taken by NSC members will leak out, and this is acknowledged by some of the President's aids. Discussion at the staff level is easier to keep secret than discussion by individualistic political figures.

A description of the range and intensity of the NSC discussions in the Cuban crisis was given this week by Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, in a speech before the New York Lawyer's Association.

"We were presented," Ball said, "with an equation of compound variables and multiple unknowns. No one has yet devised a computer that will digest such raw data as was available to us, and promptly print out a recommended course of action."

"We used the instrument at hand—an ancient but honorable instrument—the pooled judgment and experience of a small group of men, consisting, in this case, principally of the 12 officials who constituted the executive committee of the National Security Council."

"During the epic week of day and night effort that preceded the President's speech on Oct. 22, we struggled to solve the prob-

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